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SUBJECT: Embassy Promotes Women's Engagement in the Electoral Process

1. Summary: In recognition of Women's History Month, Embassy Conakry hosted a workshop on Women's Engagement in the Electoral Process in collaboration with the Club des Femmes d'Action, a local women's organization. Guinean subject area experts gave outstanding presentations on "Women as Complete Citizens" and "How to Choose my Candidate." In the discussion that followed, the women, many first time participants in an Embassy program, shared experiences and described how their behavior would change after the seminar. Finally, 78 women, representing women's organizations, political parties and unions from throughout the five main neighborhoods of Conakry, as well as from other areas in Guinea, divided up into teams and developed action plans to carry out voter registration drives in anticipation of the closing of the electoral rolls on April 16. End Summary

¶2. Ambassador Elizabeth Raspolic, Charg d'Affaires, opened the conference with a speech calling on women to take a leadership role in Guinea's transition to democracy. She explained the evolution of women's rights in the United States and highlighted the role of grassroots action in the advancement of women in American society. She called on Guinean women to take a similarly proactive role to seize their place in Guinean society through active engagement in the democratic process.

¶3. Mariama Cir Keita, President of the NGO Guinean Association for the Involvement of Women in the Electoral Process and Good Governance (AGUIFPEG) spoke about the hurdles facing Guinean women in the current system. She noted that when women hold elected positions within their party, they are often "Secretary General of Food" and that Guinean women are frequently exploited by the party for their ability to mobilize at the grassroots, but that they are not included in upper level decision making. She called on women to refuse to accept a subordinate role in party politics since Guinean women make up 52 percent of the population and have the right to equal representation.

¶4. Michelle Koundouno, project coordinator for the National Democratic Institute (NDI), outlined criteria that women should take into account when deciding which candidate to support. She noted that many of the criteria are the same for men and women, but that women must be especially vigilant to ensure that the candidate's platform takes into account issues of concern to women. She cited several examples, including the need to enforce existing laws regarding the rights and protection of women, access to water and electricity, childcare for working women, and the recognition of the economic contribution of market women.

¶5. The audience, composed of 78 representatives of grassroots organizations from across the 5 communes of Conakry, as well as other areas of Guinea, labor unions, political parties, and journalists participated actively in the discussion. For many of the women, this was the first Embassy event they had attended. In an effort to make the women from the grassroots organizations feel at ease, participants were welcomed to speak in the language they felt most comfortable in; thus the dialogue took place both in French and various local languages.

¶6. Comments from participants were extremely positive. Many women said that they will now examine the party platform before choosing their candidates and will not allow themselves to be utilized to cook, sing and dance for the party, without being included in the party's decision making process. Michelle Toundouno of NDI, a veteran presenter at seminars on this topic, remarked that the discussion taking place gave her goose bumps, as the message was being absorbed so quickly by the audience.

¶7. In the afternoon, women divided themselves into teams by neighborhood and developed action plans to educate and engage the women of their own communities by sharing the information gained at the conference. The electoral rolls for the upcoming elections in Guinea are scheduled to close on April 16, so the women chose to focus on voter registration. Actions plans included door-to-door voter registration promotion, visits to schools, markets and other places where women congregate to share the information and encourage women to register to vote. In one group, each woman committed to visiting two neighborhood imams to ask them to include the importance of voter registration in their Friday sermon at the mosque.

¶8. Comment: This seminar reached a new, but very important, audience for the Embassy. Women at the grassroots in Guinea have not had a strong political influence; however, more and more, they are pushing for inclusion. By supporting this trend, the Embassy is advancing its goals of promoting a swift return to democratic rule, and also developing contacts with an emergent group of active and committed women. End comment.

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